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ABSTRACT

A study examined the attrition problem as it affected a typical institution of higher learning supporting the education program at an Air Force base. The institution involved was Butler County Community College (BCCC), which offered classes at McConnell Air Force Base (AFB). In order to determine if the high attrition rate at McConnell was unique, 126 Air Force bases were surveyed as to the scope of their retention problems. The records of military students enrolled during the 1983 fall semester with BCCC were also examined. BCCC's attrition rate was higher than the overall Air Force average, although this disparity was perhaps explained by BCCC's emphasis on English and math classes. Colleges with high attrition rates usually had more students in their programs, charged lower tuition rates, had longer terms and a longer penalty-free drop period, and used fewer intervention techniques. Sex, race, and Air Force Qualification Exam scores had no apparent effect on retention, but age, education level, and military rank did have a significant impact. Students who withdrew were much less likely to return to classes than students who satisfactorily completed classes. A new student program to increase retention was recommended that included effective orientation, student assessment, appropriate placement, student followup shortly after the start of classes, and personalized early counseling. (YLB)

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AN ATTRITION STUDY OF THE OFF DUTY AIR FORCE EDUCATION PROGRAM AT MCCONNELL AFB.

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AN ATTRITION STUDY OF THE OFF-DUTY AIR FORCE EDUCATION PROGRAM

Almost since its inception, the Air Force's policy has been to encourage and promote off-duty education. Air Force regulations direct all education offices to provide graduate degree opportunities for officers and associate and bachelor degree opportunities for enlisted personnel. The educational goals established for Air Force personnel require that officers earn an advanced degree and all senior noncommissioned officers strive for a baccalaureate degree.

The Air Force supports its educational policies with concrete actions. It provides for sufficient funding and command support to make off-duty education a real benefit to its active duty members. McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas, as a typical and representative Air Force base, has an education staff which includes two guidance counselors to coordinate educational services for the base. Several institutions of higher education are provided on-base facilities to conduct classes and administrative services in the education center. During the 1983 fall semester, Butler County Community College offered over 100 classes and enrolled over 1100 students at McConnell AFB. In addition to the military students, there are dependents, retirees, civil servants and civilians making up the total student body. The Air Force further supports the off-duty education program by providing 75 to 90 percent tuition assistance to active duty airmen for almost any course or program desired.

Strong emphasis on education, along with adequate financial support, has resulted in large numbers of airmen participating in the off-duty education program. However, high levels of enrollments in undergraduate classes are often accompanied by large numbers of people who withdraw from classes or who fail courses because of lack of attendance. Dropping out usually has an adverse effect on the students; and, in addition, they are often required to reimburse the Air Force for the provided tuition assistance. Even though the Air Force is primarily concerned with the military student's educational development, it nevertheless finds it expensive to process the required paperwork to recoup its funds from those students who drop classes. The Air Force as well as the supporting academic institutions would prefer that the students, once enrolled, stay in the program and complete their course work.

At the completion of the 1983 fall semester, the education office at McConnell AFB found that a large percentage of the military students attending Butler County Community College on base were not completing courses in a satisfactory manner. The Butler County Community College registrar, in response to a request for information regarding disenrollments, provided the following statistics: Of 391 students enrolled during the 1983 fall term in off-duty classes, 34.3 percent did not complete their courses in part as a result of poor attendance.

Although Air Force policy requires that airmen who withdraw from classes reimburse the Air Force unless it can be shown that

military approved circumstances precluded attendance for the full semester, the administrative cost of handling the reimbursement procedures is high for the Air Force as well as for the college in which the student was enrolled. Of course, it might be beneficial for some students to stop attending college courses. However, it is generally recognized that dropping out is an impediment to a student's educational development, a futile expenditure of time, and a waste of limited educational resources. Since McConnell AFB is one of 26 similar Air Force bases within the Strategic Air Command and one of about 120 U.S. air bases located all over the world, the identification of a problem which is shared by other bases and the isolation of its causes could lead to positive steps being taken to benefit all concerned. A study was undertaken to determine the extent of the problem, and to find possible remedies.

The purpose of the study was first to determine whether the high attrition rate at McConnell AFB was unique and whether the problems faced by Butler County Community College on base were the result of institutional policies that could be changed. Second, the study was to determine whether schools at other bases similarly situated have instituted intervention techniques which have helped to increase the retention rate and to what degree these techniques have been successful. Third, the study was to identify selected factors controlled by the colleges which have an impact on retention. Finally, the study was to identify causes for the high attrition rate among military students in the

education program at McConnell AFB. It was felt that intervention techniques could be developed based upon knowledge gained through research and could be instituted by both the college and the base alike to improve the student retention rate.

In order to determine the scope of the retention problem at McConnell AFB, as well as at other Air Force bases, and to help determine the probable causes of the high withdrawal rate, 126 Air Force Bases were surveyed to determine the following:

1. What are the attrition rates of military students attending classes at Air Force bases?

2. Are there institutional factors, such as cost per credit hour, length of term and length of time allowed for penalty-free withdrawals, which potentially impact on the withdrawal rate?

3. Are there intervention techniques which have proved effective in reducing the attrition rate?

Another source of data was examined to determine if there are identifiable individual variables which possibly make some students more prone to withdraw from classes? To help answer this question, the records of military students enrolled during the 1983 fall semester with Butler County Community College at McConnell AFB were examined to determine the significance of the individual variances such as sex, race, age, military rank, education level and Air Force Qualification Exam scores.

The study provided a comprehensive and multifaceted examination of the attrition problem as it faces a typical institution of higher learning supporting the education program at

an Air Force base. The overall attrition rate was examined, and it was found that Butler County Community College's attrition rate at McConnell Air Force Base was higher than the average reported by 92 respondents, higher than the Strategic Air Command's 26 air base average and higher than the overall Air Force average.

Several factors impact on what seems to be a straightforward statement of fact. It is highly likely that, since the disenrollment figures are much harder to gather than enrollment figures, the reported disenrollment figures are not fully accurate. The data shows a spread of 41.5 percent attrition on the high side to a low of 1.5 percent for the same period.

Another factor which makes attrition studies difficult is when one college claims to be solving the attrition problem through individualized attention for students (diagnostic testing, careful class placement and continued personalized counseling) and then, states that they have suspended 1500 students during the past three years. It could be that the surgical approach to the student attrition problem is an effective way to eliminate the problem or the marginal student, but is it really solving the attrition problem? And is it really helping the student achieve maximum potential?

A factor which was not considered earlier and which could reasonably explain the disparity in the attrition rates is that all the colleges are not putting the same emphasis on English and math classes as Butler County Community College. It became apparent that these kinds of classes generated a much larger than

average disenrollment rate than the regular classes in the social sciences and humanities, for example.

The responses from the 92 colleges located at 66 different air bases were useful and established a pattern of college internal policies which affect retention. The most apparent policy which affects retention is the tuition that the colleges charge. In general high tuition resulted in lower enrollments and lower attrition. This seems to hold true because of the higher investment made by the student and the higher penalty for withdrawal which is incurred if the student has to reimburse the Air Force.

The notable exception to this phenomenon was McKendree College which charges $116 per semester hour and yet enjoys above average enrollments and below average disenrollments. McKendree College offers its classes during short one-month sessions which is the second factor affecting attrition. On the average, colleges whose semesters or terms exceeded the reported average length of nine weeks had a higher attrition rate than those whose semesters were shorter. Butler County Community College also offered classes in physics during the past three summer semesters on the campus in which military students participated. Of the 42 students who enrolled in this strenuous program, not one dropped the class.

Another factor which seemed to impact on the attrition rate is the length of time in weeks the colleges allowed students to drop their classes without incurring adverse grades. The longer

the penalty-free period, the higher the attrition rate seemed to be.

A major factor over which the colleges have influence which seemed to affect the student's retention in the classroom is the number of intervention techniques utilized by the college to stem the tide of withdrawals. Colleges utilizing higher than the average number of intervention techniques had a lower disenrollment rate, and colleges utilizing fewer intervention techniques were prone to have more students withdraw. Colleges with orientations and those with special counseling for new students and tutorial assistance semed to be especially successful in retaining their students. A few colleges seemed to provide excellent support to their students and submitted samples of their handouts and special forms. Miami-Dade Community College stands out as one of the institutions providing comprehensive institutional support and leadership in a most difficult area. However, the intervention program described by Schinoff of Miami-Dade seemed to be directed to improving the quality of the education more than at the retention problem. The college virtually eliminated open enrollment and has enforced academic standards by suspending many students who did not maintain an acceptable grade point average.

The director for Coastline Community College at Norton AFB has recently conducted her own attrition studies. The procedures established by the college showed a concern for reducing the attrition rate. Many of the steps outlined in the institutional

survey which was mailed to all the air bases were currently in use at that location. Furthermore, Coastline Community College has a comprehensive follow up procedure in place in which students were sent reminders and encouragements as they progressed through the classes.

Prince George's Community College's intervention program puts strong emphasis on an orientation program including one which was designed for part-time students. Another requirement Prince George's Community College incorporated was a withdrawal form which required the student to contact a counselor, among others, prior to being allowed to withdraw. Although this procedure seemed somewhat cumbersome and did not address itself to the student who just stops attending classes, it did include a short survey section which was designed to obtain reasons behind the student's withdrawal.

The Butler County Community College intervention program highlighted a major problem which institutions face as they develop intervention policies. Orientation classes were incorporated six years ago and have been in place ever since. Participation in this class averaged about thirty new students a semester. Just before this study was initiated, enrollments in this class had dwindled to around six students per semester. As attention was once again focused on the attrition problem, participation in this class was dramatically increased to over fifty new students.

A major part of the study was designed to examine the

contrast between the persister and the non-persister. In order to do that most effectively, the education records of all the military students attending Butler County Community College during 1983 fall semester at McConnell AFB were examined. Some of the findings were surprising and should be considered by any other educator who might be concerned about student attrition. As a start, contrary to other literature on the subject, this research found no significant differences in persisters and non-persisters due to sex or race. Even more surprising was that the Air Force Qualification Exam (an Air Force administered aptitude test) also was not a factor which impacted on persistence. The study results indicated no significant differences between persisters and non-persisters due to AQE scores. The implication for this finding is that colleges could shift their attention from remedial programs to motivational efforts. It can be noted that the Fundamentals of Algebra class offered by Butler County Community College is a remedial class designed to prepare students to eventually take college algebra. Fundamentals of Algebra does not meet the college's math requirement and yet had a fifty percent dropout rate.

The three factors which impact favorably on retention are all maturity related. Education level of the students and their military rank made a significant difference when it came to retention. This knowledge gives a special opportunity to the administrators and to the faculty of a college offering classes on a military base to help develop this maturation process by

providing special attention to first time students, by providing timely follow up contact when required and by assuring that new students are provided personalized and adequate counseling.

From the personal interviews with the non-persisters, it became apparent that the majority of the students were interested in pursuing an Associate of Arts Degree from Butler County Community College or an Associate of Applied Science degree from the Community College of the Air Force as a first step in their academic endeavors. Withdrawing from classes was an apparent setback to their achieving an academic goal to which they aspired. It was also apparent that many of the withdrawals were job related caused by additional work requirements. The statistics show that approximately ten percent of both the non-persisters and of persisters left the base. The remaining non-persisters who felt that their Air Force job interfered with classroom attendance were apparently less able to cope with this problem than more mature, more experienced and higher ranking counterparts who were able to persist. This information also provides an opportunity for instructors to structure classes in such a way as to be able to accommodate these students and to find a way to prevent these students from becoming discouraged and yet be able to keep up with the required work.

To summerize, the findings of the research revealed that the internal policies of the colleges and universities impact on the retention rate of their campuses. Colleges with high attrition rates usually had more students in their programs, charged lower

tuition rates, had longer terms, had a longer penalty free drop period and utilized fewer intervention techniques. The sex, race and Air Force AQE scores of the students had no apparent effect on retention, whereas the age, education level and military rank did have a significant impact. Military students seemed to be degree oriented; however, their military jobs seemed to negatively affect the younger students. Furthermore, students who withdrew from classes were much less likely to return to classes than students who completed their classes in a satisfactory manner.

It is apparent that the attrition problem is an unnecessary waste of educational and human resources. Colleges which recruit students, and most do, have a special responsibility to assure that the students have a fair chance of succeeding and if a college finds that it has to do serious recruiting for students, it can spend more productive time in trying to retain the students it already has.

Colleges and universities must recognize that the attrition problem cannot be solved by one person. It will take the concerted efforts of the administration, the faculty and the counseling staff to provide a campus atmosphere which is conducive to learning and which pays particular attention to new students as they get involved in the academic process. Faculty should be encouraged to provide specific instructional material with adequate follow- up for each lesson missed as a result of military duties.

A new student program is vital. A program which includes an

effective orientation, student assessment, appropriate placement, student follow-up shortly after classes start and personalized counseling early in the semester is the minimum which colleges should provide if they are at all interested in student retention.

Colleges could examine their internal policies to strengthen their retention program. They could offer short term courses and they could examine their grading policies. A liberal withdrawal policy seems to foster a higher rate of withdrawals and allows instructors to encourage some students to drop classes rather than providing appropriate assistance.

Since not much research has been accomplished on attrition directed at military students in off-duty education, similar studies such as this, conducted at other bases, would be useful. Specifically, some effective attrition studies could be accomplished with multi-based institutions such as the University of Maryland, the City Colleges of Chicago and Chapman College, where many of the institutional factors are constant, and controlled studies could be accomplished. The effects of some selected institutional policies and intervention programs could be tried at one site which could then be studied and evaluated.

Butler County Community College has recently undertaken a concerted effort to reduce its attrition rate. It incorporated the American College Testing Program called ASSET, Project of Skills for Successful Entry and Testing, reemphasized the new-student orientation program, added special remedial English classes and increased instructor awareness of the attrition

problem. A follow up study could produce interesting data and benefit all similarly situated students.

Other opportunities for expanded studies could include the development of class material which could be incorporated into the classroom which would accommodate the student whose duties require an absence from a class. The development of a training program for faculty teaching part-time students could also result in enriching research.

Educators have an extraordinary responsibility to the people of this nation. It is their responsibility to ensure that all students over which they have some influence have the opportunity to achieve to the maximum level of their potential. It is insufficient to allow students to waste their energies and their talents in educational pursuits for which they are not sufficiently prepared. It is unprofessional to allow students to get discouraged with their studies because of inattention, a cavalier attitude or a lack of suitable and timely counseling.

The problem of attrition is a personal problem in which a student's hopes and dreams are unfulfilled. It ought not be for reasons over which administrators, faculty and educators in general have some control. It is far more popular to equate succeses with the number of new students which were recruited into a program; however, it is morally more meaningful to help these students remain at their studies.

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People perceive the retention problem differently. What is your institution doing to strengthen its retention rate?

Check all that apply.

_____ Conduct orientations for new students

_____ Provide required student advising prior to enrolling

_____ Provide special counseling for new students

_____ Provide tutorial assistance for students

_____ Provide diagnostic test information

_____ Make teachers aware of first time students

_____ Utilize an early warning system

_____ Provide opportunities for students to transfer into lower level classes if needed

_____ Make counseling sessions mandatory prior to withdrawal

_____ Limit the number of classes taken as a first time student

_____ Provide a math or English lab for assistance

_____ Other (specify) _____

_____

_____

Author Notes

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